

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

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For several decades, vocabulary has been a matter of words cards and word lists or, after students attain basic conversational skills or reach the intermediate level, has been relegated to the sidelines in classroom teaching (Brown, 2007). We have assumed that students will be able to seek out and select the vocabulary they need to meet their educational, business or social goals without explicit and extended guidance. We have also assumed that once they have selected appropriate vocabulary, they will be able to formulate and carry out a successful plan of self-study on their own outside of the classroom. In recent years, however, it has become clear that vocabulary, which is the foundation of all other language skills, requires more focused attention in the classroom due to its complexity (Hinkel 2009; Nation, 2013; Schmitt, 2008).

One of the questions facing language instructors is how direct vocabulary instruction should be. Much recent research into vocabulary acquisition and studies of learning strategies strongly indicates that the explicit vocabulary learning vs. implicit vocabulary learning issue is not a dichotomy, but rather a continuum (Hunt and Belgar, 2005; Lee and Tan, 2012; Nation 2001; Schmitt 2008). It is a continuum on which some vocabulary learners tend toward implicit learning while others tend toward the explicit learning end of the continuum, depending on the learners, situation and vocabulary to be learned. However, it is clear that effective, direct vocabulary teaching plays a critical role in improving vocabulary skills for all learners (Hinkel 2002a, Nation, 2005).

Focused Vocabulary Instruction

Therefore, it is useful to keep in mind two critical aspects of vocabulary instruction. The first is that for vocabulary to be learned both receptively and productively direct attention to meaning and use is necessary. That is, students need both conscious attention and sufficient exposure to effectively acquire and employ targeted vocabulary. Second, it is important to remember the fact that all students, even at advanced levels, may still need to learn *how to learn* vocabulary (Lewis, 2000).

Learners' abilities to express their ideas in writing have a significant impact on both their academic success and self-confidence (Coxhead, 2006; Hinkel, 2009). Consequently, vocabulary learning must be upfront and center stage in writing instruction. Improved vocabulary use leads to a feeling of success; in contrast, a lack of vocabulary impairs learners at all levels of academic endeavors and undermines even the most diligent learners. The proposed three-step sequence below, targets high-intermediate and advanced learners enrolled in university writing classes specifically designed for nonnative speakers. The three steps in the process are:

- a)selection
- b)definition
- c)exposure and use

Selection

Having acknowledged that explicit, focused instruction can greatly benefit our

students; the next task educators face is deciding how much vocabulary to teach. Although it has been demonstrated that gaining familiarity with as many as 30 words per hour is possible with high frequency items, it is more practical, as well as more effective to avoid presenting students with long lists of words. Moreover, over the course of a term, semester or year the vocabulary sets should be recycled at regular intervals (Schmitt, 2000). In the approach outlined below, these suggestions were put into practice. Students work with 10-15 target items every week and a half to two weeks, and the vocabulary items are recycled over the course of a ten-week term.

The next decision may be deciding what vocabulary to teach. The most common approach is to teach the vocabulary

presented in a textbook unit. The majority of the teacher-assigned vocabulary used in the approach discussed below is taken from the Academic Word list (AWL). The AWL (Coxhead, 2000) contains 570 words that appear with the highest frequency in English-language academic texts, which are divided into 10 sub-lists starting with the most common words in sub-list 1. When using the AWL, target items can be chosen according to a topic the students will be reading or writing about, the nature of the assignments (e.g., a position paper, a critical analysis paper, an argument essay, etc.), or by sub-lists.

An alternate strategy, which may increase students' motivation, is to have students generate an additional vocabulary list. That is, a list of vocabulary items they believe they need or that they want to learn. The teacher and students can determine the length of the list together. Several of these words can be studied each week in conjunction with textbook vocabulary over the course of the term or semester. Vocabulary items can

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also be determined by the types of projects on which the students will be working. For example, for a writing assignment on how social media is changing cultural beliefs, students can divide into vocabulary groups, and each group can be assigned a specific number or type of vocabulary to learn and teach to the rest of the class prior to writing the essay. Finally, target vocabulary can include “problem” vocabulary – high frequency words or phrases students are very familiar with but which they cannot use accurately on a consistent basis. Some obvious candidates might be semantically related verb pairs such as know/learn, say/tell, explain/discuss and state/express. Similarly, the distinctions between some so-called synonyms such as in contrast/on the contrary, nonetheless/however, and besides/except are good examples of vocabulary students often struggle with.

Definition

Although defining vocabulary must be more than a matter of looking up words in a dictionary, it is where most students start. In addition, at the low to intermediate levels, it is not unusual for teachers to encourage — or even require — students to use target language dictionaries to help them avoid simple translation using a bilingual dictionary. However, in the present approach, a “look it up twice” technique is encouraged. In this technique, the first time the students look up a word they are encouraged to use a bilingual dictionary. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, the use of bilingual dictionaries can eliminate the possibility of students encountering more unknown vocabulary in the target language dictionary definitions, thereby creating more confusion and frustration. Instead, with the bilingual dictionary, students are able to quickly attach a meaning to the un-

known word, giving them a foundation to build on. Next, the students look the word up in a target language dictionary, and discuss how closely the target language definition matches or varies from the meaning they found in the bilingual dictionary. This provides an opportunity for students to recognize nuances and usage differences between the target vocabulary and its counterpart in their native languages as well as illustrating the limits of direct translation. Fortunately, the majority of the definitions found in target language dictionaries will match or closely approximate the definitions found in bilingual dictionaries. On the other hand, there may be important and often confusing nuances to the actual meaning in the target language that are “lost in translation” in a bilingual dictionary. The nuances are rarely transparent to students even when example sentences are provided in the target language dictionary. One example of this is the common misconception among L2 English learners that the verb *to expect* is synonymous with *to hope for* or *to wish for*. This erroneous conflation of meaning is so far from native speaker usage that it is often impossible for native speakers of English to interpret a sentence such as “All students expect for good grades.”

As a final part of the technique, students can be assigned a homework task to gauge their understanding while reinforcing learning through use. This could be as basic as writing several example sentences for each vocabulary item or as complex as writing a paragraph in which several target items must be used. It is important that the task is more than a “write down” assignment. Discussing the homework examples as a class can reinforce meaning and, once again focus students’ attention on how the target language definitions compare to or contrast with the

bilingual definition. Both teacher input and having students generate multiple examples for each target item, related to situations or topics they are familiar with, are critical to providing students with semantic or pragmatic components of meaning that a traditional “look it up and memorize” approach lacks.

Another definition technique is the negotiation of meaning in which students are encouraged to guess a meaning from context or previous encounters with the target item or a related form. This allows students to check their own knowledge as well as giving them a chance to share knowledge with their peers. All of the guesses are written on the board and then teacher supplies or elicits more sentences using the vocabulary to allow students to check and refine the meanings they have generated. Once, the correct meanings have been found, erroneous guesses can be discussed to discover how the incorrect guesses were made, and common misconceptions can be addressed.

Finally, students’ attention should be directed toward the importance of learning collocations and relevant structural patterns for the target items. As discussed above, it has generally been the case that vocabulary learning has entailed the learning of individual, independent words; however, words interact with other words to create meaning. Lewis (2000) notes that meaning often resides not in an individual word but in the words it occurs with or the patterns it is used in; “giving students collocations ... will widen their understanding of what... words mean and, more importantly, how they are used” (p. 15). Nowadays, collocation dictionaries or concordance websites are convenient tools that both teachers and students can take advantage of. For example, after all of the target vocabulary items have been defined

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using the “look it up twice” techniques, students can compare samples they have written down for homework and look for word patterns in the sentences such as prepositions, nouns, verbs, or modifiers. Once some patterns have been found in example sentences, and students see that learning vocabulary is more than words in isolation, students can be shown how to look for further patterns using an online concordance website. If students have their own laptops they can follow along as the teacher demonstrates how to find and use a concordance website.

Exposure and Use

Nation (1990) concluded that L2 learners needed at least 5 exposures in comprehensible contexts to learn a word. Horst, Cobb, & Meara (1998) found that in reading words that appeared in a text over eight times were more likely to be learned than words that appeared fewer times. The amount of exposure that is necessary to learn a word is still open to debate. Still, in her overview of explicit vocabulary instruction, McCarten, (2007) points out that most research indicates that multiple exposures –both explicit and implicit -- are necessary for retention. She further notes that vocabulary acquisition is also facilitated by using a system for organizing relevant features of a word such as pronunciation, meanings associated with prefix and suffixes, collocations, parts of speech and making vocabulary personal.

Taking those findings into consideration, explicit exposure in this approach is, in fact, a series of tasks that are recycled over the course of the term incorporating multiple exposure, a clear and consistent organization format and use of student input. For each vocabulary item, in this approach the goal is to provide at least three explicit exposures to new target items every week, and at least three exposures to four to five previously

learned words every other week.

The first step is to establish the meaning and distinctive features of the target vocabulary. The teacher assigns three or four different words to different groups. Using cell phones or laptops, each group has to use the ‘look it up twice’ method to define their words, making notes about usage such as the part of speech and whether nouns are count or non-count. With this information, they write a definition for the assigned vocabulary in their own words. The second task is to look up each word on a concordance website. The group makes notes about the two most frequent collocations or about common grammatical patterns associated with the target structure and creates two sentences for each item. Each group reports their findings to the class.

Having clarified the meanings of the target vocabulary, and having identified the most frequent collocations for each item, students begin vocabulary logs or create vocabulary cards, for homework or in class. Students’ organization format includes a dictionary definition and a definition in their own words. Each entry also has at least three sentences created by the student using the target word. Whenever possible, students are encouraged to have a native speaker vet these sentences at a later date. Students also post their vetted sentences online to a class discussion website to share with other students. As part of the on-going discussion students can report ways they have used the vocabulary outside of class and any new information they learn about a word.

The two-part follow-up task is a dictation and paraphrasing activity. Dictation is a good tool for vocabulary instruction when the context is clear and the students are familiar with the majority of the vocabulary (Nation,1991).When the context is accessible

and relevant to students' goals, interests or class topics, it is quick and efficient, and focuses students' attention on multiple aspects of a word, including spelling, meaning and pronunciation in a meaningful way. Paraphrasing, on the other hand, can reveal the depth of students' understanding of the target items.

First, a short paragraph (5-7 sentences), containing at least four of the target vocabulary words, is read. The paragraph is related to a topic students will be writing about or have written about. The passage is read three times. After the second reading students correct their sentences, paying attention to the spelling and collocations of each word before exchanging their paragraph with another student for further editing. The paragraph is read a third time as students check over their work. Next, students write the main ideas of the passage using at least three of the vocabulary words and compare their summaries with their partner. A similar process is then repeated using the same vocabulary in a different paragraph. This time the passage is only read two times. After the second reading students rewrite the paragraph using synonyms to replace the target vocabulary. Paraphrased paragraphs are shared with the class.

Another paraphrasing task that can be used is a graduated task that starts with individual student work and progresses to a whole class discussion. For this activity, six to ten vocabulary items are used. First, each student writes two sentences for each vocabulary word, followed by a paraphrase for each of the sentences they have constructed. After that, students are paired up, and each student reads his/her two original sentences to a partner. The partner writes a paraphrase for each of those sentences. At this point the partners join with another pair of students to select the four sentences with the best paraphrases. Finally, each

group presents its final list to the class, and explains why they believe each of the paraphrases maintains the meaning and tone of the original sentences. The class then decides whether they agree with the decisions made by each group. At the end of the activity, students select two paraphrased sentences to add to their vocabulary logs.

Finally, students must demonstrate an ability to use the target vocabulary accurately in their writing. This is accomplished by creating minimal vocabulary requirements for all graded writing assignments. For short assignments of less than 6 paragraphs, it is not unreasonable to require that at least ten vocabulary items from the class vocabulary list, or a shorter topic appropriate list, be included in the writing assignment. For longer assignments, such as position papers or research essays, the number of required items can easily go as high as twenty-five to thirty words/phrases without students having to resort to tortured unnatural sentences in order to meet the requirements. Moreover, for longer assignments students can be required to give a short presentation (5 to 10 minutes) on a class topic or research question, with the use of a specific or minimum number of target vocabulary as a requirement for the assignment.

As with any approach or set of techniques, success can vary from class to class and student to student, but the consistency of teacher use and knowledge lends to its continued success. The process engages teachers as well as students in an ongoing learning process involving revision and adaptation. This approach and these techniques are part of that process --- an attempt to bring explicit vocabulary instruction into the classroom in a systematic and focused manner.

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Conclusion

Focused vocabulary instruction is not a magic bullet. It does not negate the role of incidental learning, nor is it a quick fix to the problems limited vocabulary and poor acquisition skills present for L2 learners. The aim of this look at explicit instruction has been to look at some of the possibilities for expanding vocabulary instruction beyond memorization techniques and reading-based approaches. Previous research has suggested that explicit attention to vocabulary can produce several desirable effects in the classroom. It can offer more opportunities to ensure that learners are exposed to appropriate and necessary vocabulary. Second, it raises students' awareness of the importance of broadening their vocabulary base, and how it benefits their writing (and other skills). Once students have experienced this kind of extensive exposure and practice, the chances that they will become more aware of vocabulary receptively is also heightened. Finally, focused instruction on the value of a systematic approach to vocabulary learning goes beyond word lists/cards which students can adapt to their own learning styles outside the classroom.

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